



UNDERSTANDING HIV/AIDS



This Toolkit deals with the following issues:

- What is HIV/AIDS?
- How is HIV transmitted?
- What are some of the important features of the HIV/AIDS epidemic?
- Is there any evidence that prevention programmes work?
- Is there prospect of a cure for HIV/AIDS?
- Is the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS higher for some sectors of the population?
- Is HIV/AIDS a manageable condition?
- Useful Internet resources

What is HIV/AIDS?

- HIV stands for *Human Immunodeficiency Virus*. This virus causes AIDS.
- AIDS stands for *Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome*. This is the condition caused by the HI virus, which attacks a body's immune system, weakening it and making it more susceptible to infections and some cancers.
- A person who becomes infected may experience a period of illness with flu-like symptoms, but often shows no signs of infection for a period ranging from a few months to many years.
- The average time from infection with HIV to development of AIDS is seven to nine years.
- As the immune system fails a person will experience periods of illness that increase in frequency, severity and duration until they die. Usually this stage takes one to two years.
- No cure is yet available, but many of the diseases associated with AIDS can be treated.

How is HIV transmitted?

- HIV is difficult to transmit except through penetrative sex, and even then, provided the person is healthy, HIV is not easily transmitted.
- The main routes of transmission are through sexual intercourse, re-use of contaminated needles by injecting drug users and infection from mother to child.
- Less common routes of transmission in Africa include blood transfusions using infected blood and re-use of needles or accidental injuries from contaminated instruments in medical settings.
- HIV cannot be transmitted via sneezing or other casual contact.
- Most HIV infection in developing countries is spread through sexual intercourse.
- The only ways to prevent sexual transmission are through abstaining from penetrative sex or by using a condom.
- HIV is spread more easily in sexual intercourse if there are sores from other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). These allow the virus more easily to enter the blood stream (this is why HIV prevention programmes often include the treatment of STDs).
- Mother-child transmission of HIV accounts for about 15-20% of HIV infections in Africa; in the absence of interventions, about one third of babies born to HIV-infected women will become infected before birth, at birth or through breastfeeding.

This document is one in a series of pamphlets targeted at Government Ministries.

The aims are:

- to assist priority sectors to identify areas where they are vulnerable to the impacts of HIV/AIDS.
- to suggest specific steps that can be taken.

What are some of the important features of the HIV/AIDS epidemic?

- A person infected with HIV may have many years of productive normal life before experiencing periods of sickness leading to death.
- Because there are no obvious signs of sickness for many years, the person with HIV may (unless tested) pass on the virus to many others without realising it.
- The scale of the epidemic is very different from other diseases:
 - Worldwide 30 million people were infected with HIV by January 1998 and 11.7 million had already died of AIDS.
 - In 1999, 89% of people with HIV were estimated to be living in Sub-Saharan Africa and 83% of all AIDS deaths had occurred here.
- HIV infection rates differ in different Sub-Saharan African countries, but in many the virus is still spreading.
- The highest rates of infection are found in young adults and in urban areas. Women tend to be infected at younger ages than men.
- HIV also causes an increase in the spread of other infectious diseases, notably TB: it is estimated that one out of every four TB deaths *among HIV-negative people* would not have occurred in the absence of the HIV epidemic.

Is there any evidence that prevention programmes work?

- Yes, there are success stories and strategies: in Uganda for example, mass education and prevention programmes have resulted in a dramatic slowing of the increase in new infections; in Namibia pilot programmes in schools led to a decrease in risk behaviour; in Zimbabwe, peer education programmes in factories slowed the rate of new infections.
- Mother-child transmission of HIV can be reduced by giving the mother anti-retroviral drugs prior to and during delivery, in some cases delivering the baby through Caesarean section, and using formula feeding instead of breastfeeding.
- Comprehensive interventions to reduce mother-child transmission are complex but are being developed.
- Helping people who engage in the riskiest behaviour to protect themselves and others may be the most effective way of preventing infection among the entire population. A programme in Nairobi, Kenya, suggested treating the sexually transmitted diseases of 500 prostitutes, raising their condom use to 80 per cent. It would prevent 10,000 infections per year among the sex workers, clients, the clients' wives, and other partners. On the other hand, a similar level of condom use among an equal number of men in that community would have prevented fewer than 100 infections per year. Programmes that prevent infection among other groups of people with large numbers of partners - like truck drivers, migrant workers, bar workers, and the military - can be expected to have a similar impact.

Is there prospect of a cure for HIV/AIDS?

- There is no known cure for AIDS or vaccine against HIV infection and it is unlikely that such a cure or vaccine will be found or be widely available for many years.
- Almost everyone infected with HIV will eventually become sick and die from AIDS.
- New treatments have been developed and continue to evolve. They can reduce levels of virus infection but not eliminate it; have side effects; need complex medical backup; and are extremely expensive (\$10000 per person per year for triple drug therapy).

Is HIV/AIDS a manageable condition?

- There are three main strategies to manage HIV/AIDS. Firstly, certain common opportunistic infections, such as TB can be prevented through using various drugs. This substantially improves the quality of life and survival. Secondly, anti-HIV drugs such as AZT, are effective in slowing down the multiplication of HIV in the body, resulting in fewer complications and in many cases, prolonged survival. Thirdly, there are effective treatments for most conditions associated with AIDS, although some are very costly.
- In developing countries, good primary care to prevent and manage opportunistic infections is often unavailable, and anti-HIV/AIDS drugs are currently unaffordable in resource-poor settings.

Is the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS higher for some sectors of the population?

- Yes. In developed countries, HIV infection is mainly to be found in intravenous drug abusers, men who have sex with men, and marginalised poorer communities.
- In developing countries, a greater proportion of the population is at high risk. This is because of the extent of untreated sexually transmitted infections; the disempowerment of women, making it difficult for women to negotiate safer sex; the high rate of sexual partner change often as a result of dislocated relationships; and the very low usage of condoms.

Useful Internet resources

The following web sites contain regularly updated information about HIV/AIDS, and useful links to other sites.

<http://www.unaids.org/>

- the official web site of the Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS, this site includes fact sheets, downloadable graphics and slide shows, best practice documents and links to the free CDC Epi-Info software

<http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu>

- includes information on prevention and education, information on social issues; statistics

and epidemiology and a comprehensive directory of links to other sites

<http://www.worldbank.org/>

- includes online documents useful to researchers and policy-makers and links to other sites

<http://www.safaid.org>

- this site contains HIV/AIDS information and links specific to Southern Africa

<http://www.iaen.org>

- the website of the International AIDS Economics Network

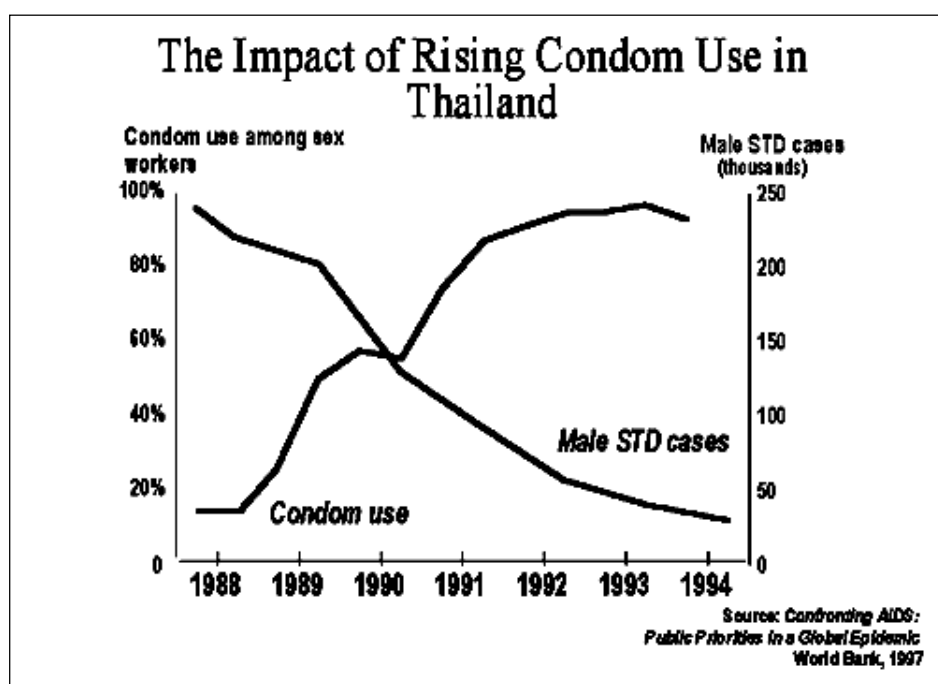
The full Toolkit range:

Generic:

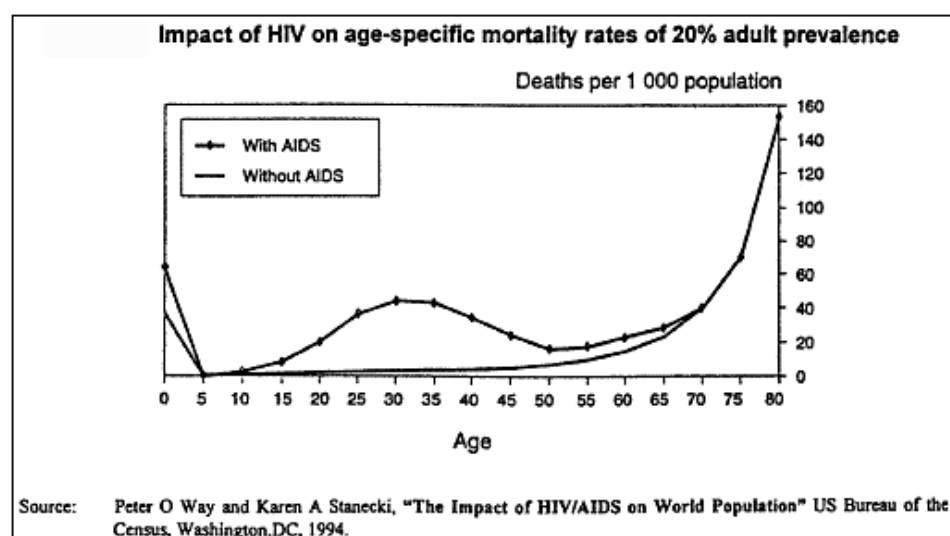
- Understanding HIV/AIDS
- Why HIV/AIDS is a Government Issue
- HIV/AIDS and Ministry Employees
- Planning Tools

Ministry and/or Department:

- HIV/AIDS and Agriculture
- HIV/AIDS and Education
- HIV/AIDS and Finance
- HIV/AIDS and Health
- HIV/AIDS and Housing and Public Works
- HIV/AIDS and Labour
- HIV/AIDS and Welfare



This graph clearly demonstrates the effects of condom use - as condom use increases, the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) decreases.



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